

I. HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

A. Earthworks

After four days of unsuccessful frontal assaults to capture Petersburg, Grant decided to cut the arteries leading to the heart of the Confederate supply center. To accomplish that task, Union soldiers built for their protection and Confederate soldiers for defense, the earthen fortifications that surrounded the city. This became a precursor to the trench warfare employed in World War I.

The fortifications included in the "Eastern Front" of Petersburg National Battlefield played strategic roles in key military actions. The original 55 batteries of the Confederate Dimmock Line were to protect the city from attack, but on June 15, 1864 more than a mile of the defensive line, Batteries 3 through 11, fell in the first Union assault. Elliott's salient was the segment of the Confederate line that was the target of a Union mining operation that resulted in the July 30, 1864 battle of the "Crater". Union Battery XIII and XVI would provide artillery support for the doomed attack. Fort Friend, Fort Haskell, Fort Stedman, Gracie's and Colquitt's salients all were part of Lee's last offensive, March 25, 1864: Gracie's and Colquitt's salients as the launching point for the attack and Fort Stedman, Fort Friend, Fort Haskell and Battery XI as objectives.

The seven Union forts of the "Western Front" were independent segments of the line and additions to Grant's tightening noose around Petersburg. These earthworks were engineering marvels, many containing elements not duplicated elsewhere. Fort Fisher was the largest of the fortifications built during the 292 days of military activity. They provided a defensive position against attack and were the launching point for all Union operations against the Confederate right flank including the final assaults of April 2, 1865, and the battle at Confederate Fort Gregg, which forced Lee to abandon Petersburg.

B. Archaeological Components

The archaeological resources at Petersburg National Battlefield are virtually untapped and promise a wealth of information about the men who lived, fought and died here. The armies that were embattled around Petersburg numbered more than 160,000 troops. These men provided most of the labor in building these fortifications, with the exception of the batteries of the original Dimmock Line, which was originally constructed using, among others, an African-American slave labor force. Due to their key positions, the fortifications were the targets of enemy attacks and thus received tremendous shelling. The earthworks also provided shelter for the men during the Petersburg campaign. As a garrison area, these fortifications hold a treasure of buried resources enlightening us to the soldier's daily life. When the Confederates abandoned Petersburg the Union armies followed immediately and the things that were not quickly gathered were left behind, much of which remains buried there today.



Rives Salient

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